

Joseph Lyman Silsbee

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Joseph Lyman Silsbee (1848-1913), born in 1848 in Salem, Massachusetts, graduated from Exeter and Harvard. In 1870, he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first architectural school in the United States. Then he studied at an architectural firm in Boston. Going to Europe, he traveled and sketched architecture. Some of the architecture that he sketched originated in Norman Shaw and Shaw's Queen Anne style of architecture.

In 1874, Silsbee, back from Europe, submitted an eccentric, complex structure for the Syracuse Savings Bank. Judges saw a "massive yet graceful, dreamy yet functional design" and announced that Silsbee's design would be the building for the Syracuse Savings Bank. This Victorian building was Silsbee's first commission and the tallest building at the time in Syracuse. Its middle tower seemed to reach for the heavens. Its complexity displayed itself in the details—flowers, leaves, and many other details that could not be understood when looked at all together. About the only simple thing about it was the coloring—tan limestone and chocolate-brown sandstone. Syracuse architectural historian Evamaria Hardin remarked, "It is certainly not a boring building." This building is Silsbee's greatest creation, his "artful chaos," made before his "ferocious style was tamed," according to critic David Ramsey.

In 1882, Silsbee started an office with James H. Marling in Buffalo. Silsbee had designed the Falconwood clubhouse in Grand Island, however that clubhouse had burned down in the summer of 1882. He had also designed the clubhouse for the Gentlemen's Driving Club in Hamlin Park. Neither clubhouse still exists. The aforementioned clubhouse commissions enabled Silsbee to receive more commissions that included twenty-one houses and a few

commercial buildings. Silsbee's first two house commissions, the 1881 Noyes/Naylon House and the Bemis House, cost \$25,000 each. Buffalo has the greatest concentration of surviving Silsbee houses, a collection of Queen Anne and Shingle styles.

In 1886, Silsbee founded a new office with a partner, Edward A. Kent in Chicago, where Silsbee became a popular residential architect. He built three houses in Illinois—two in Ogle County and one in Adams County—that were placed in the National Register of Historic Places. For the World's Columbian Exposition, Silsbee designed the Moving Sidewalk and the West Virginia Building. Silsbee's West Virginia Building cost \$20,000, partly due to ornamental iron work from Wheeling.

Silsbee's great talent was his ability to "transport his vision for a building from mind to paper." His Syracuse Savings Bank is the perfect example of the following phrases of Austin Fox's: "Architecture is the sound of the designer's voice intermingled with his architectural vocabulary" and "architecture is frozen poetry." Silsbee's drawing ability made a great impression on the young Frank Lloyd Wright who was destined to become America's great architect. As Wright had written in his autobiography, "His (Silsbee's) superior talent in design had made him respected in Chicago." This was the highest praise. Wright would often observe Silsbee working on drafts for a building while Wright worked for Silsbee. Wright described "those swift, freely drawn pencil strokes as reminding him of 'standing corn in the field waving in the breeze.'"

Joseph Lyman Silsbee's reputation began to decline by 1897. However, he kept practicing architecture until his death in 1913. His accomplishments included the Moving Sidewalk for the World's Fair of Chicago—the "forerunner of moving platforms and escalators today," 350 known designs of his scattered throughout the country, and his influence on the early work of Frank

Lloyd Wright. He enjoyed a successful career and a vigorous practice. [From Stanley Appelbaum, *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893*; "The Dream City," *World's Fair Art Series*, Mar. 1, 1894; Austin M. Fox, "Dog on a High Pitched Roof: The Question of Silsbee in Buffalo," <http://ah.bfn.org/a/north/267/fox/index.html> (Sept. 21, 2003); "Joseph Lyman Silsbee," http://syracusetheandnow.usadatanet.net/architects/Joseph_Lyman_Silsbee/Joseph_Lyman_Silsbee.htm (Sept. 24, 2003); "Joseph Lyman Silsbee & Associates in Buffalo, NY," <http://ah.bfn.org/a/archs/silb/silbiog/> (Sept. 21, 2003); David Ramsey, "Drawing on Banks," http://syracusetheandnow.usadatanet.net/Architects/Joseph_Lyman_Silsbee/Drawing_on_Banks.htm (Sept. 22, 2003); Meryle Secrest, Frank Lloyd Wright; "World's Columbian Exposition," <http://web.mit.edu/museum/chicago/exposition.html> (Sept. 24, 2003).]